

JUNE 4, 1987

Viewed from the ranch house, green grass and red and yellow wild flowers are within stirrup reach. Blossoms send a fragrance across our paths as we ride to work. Only in scattered places is the ground visible to a man or his horse. To stay out of sink holes, we have to take it plenty easy. It sure does help to be on an old pony that has more on his mind than grazing on mesquite leaves and going back to the house.

Much of the vegetation is new to us. All kinds of long stemmed vines and broad leafed weeds push through the heavy turf. On a normal year in the Shortgrass Country, a range specialist doesn't have to be able to identify much more than six species of minute grama and fading fescue. But this year of so much rainfall, we've been covered up in mysterious plants.

One thing I've recognized is a blue flowered thistle that we used to call "Night Eye." Old timers claimed that it'd kill horses operation down on the old luck, I never did have any luck making those thistles work.

After the big flood in '59, he must have had 30 or 40 mares, that many colts, and a scattering of yearlings running on the low country where those blue thistles thrived. A couple of yearlings and a bad crippled mare were all I remembered losing before or after the high-water.

But those particular thoroughbreds were so owl-headed it would've been easy to tell if they were dead, but nearly impossible to tell whether they were blind. As an eye doctor can tell you, in order to run an eye test the patient has to look: He can't be slinging his head or rattling the Bits in mouth against his teeth and pass an eye examination. It'd sure be a joke to find out that they were blind, as nard as we tried to make them work stock. If I ever school any young cowboys again, I'm going to warn them to be sure that their horses have two good eyes.

For certain, some of the new growth is poisonous to the sheep. Part of mastering the woolie game is admitting that sheep are going to lap up the poison weeds of the season. Yesterday, while we were gathering a pasture, I watched an old ewe have a coughing fit near an ant bed. Before she'd stopped wheezing and snorting, ants on the edge of the bed were curling up and dying from spray of her spittle.

I don't know whether the Shortgrass Country can stand so much prosperity, or why things used to work so smooth in the old days. Maybe it was something else besides thistles that got those horses.